

# Reading Guide

## Down Under

### Bill Bryson

#### Introduction

The author of *A Walk in the Woods* draws readers in campfire-style, relating wacky anecdotes and random facts gathered on multiple trips down under, all the while lightening the statistics with infusions of whimsical humor. Arranged loosely by region, the book bounces between Canberra and Melbourne, the Outback and the Gold Coast, showing Bryson alone and with partners in tow. His unrelenting insistence that Australia is the most dangerous place on earth ("If you are not stung or pronged to death in some unexpected manner, you may be fatally chomped by sharks or crocodiles, or carried helplessly out to sea by irresistible currents, or left to stagger to an unhappy death in the baking outback") spins off dozens of tales involving jellyfish, spiders and the world's 10 most poisonous snakes. Pitfalls aside, Bryson revels in the beauty of this country, home to ravishing beaches and countless unique species ("80% of all that lives in Australia, plant and animal, lives nowhere else"). He glorifies the country, alternating between awe, reverence and fear, and he expresses these sentiments with frankness and candor, via truly funny prose and a conversational pace that is at once unhurried and captivating. Peppered with seemingly irrelevant (albeit amusing) yarns, this work is a delight to read, whether or not a trip to the continent is planned.

#### About the Author

Bill Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa. For twenty years he lived in England, where he worked for *The Times* and *The Independent*, and wrote for many major British and American publications. He has written numerous travel memoirs. He now lives in Hanover, New Hampshire, with his wife and four children.

#### Topics to Consider

1. What is your favourite anecdote from this book?
2. What is your least favourite section?
3. Are there any towns or places in Australia that you would like to visit, having read *Down Under*? Are there any towns or places in Australia that you would definitely not like to visit, having read this book?
4. Are there any instances of Aussie foibles and prejudices that ring particularly true to you? Or is this book appear to merely be a very surface view of Australia, one that is reinforced by the international media view of Australia, a country of kangaroos, koalas and Crocodile Dundees?

5. Bryson seems to have difficulty in understanding the Australian attitude to understatement, of a casualness that does not seem apparent in other western nations. Of how Australians do not seem to think it unusual or possibly a bizarre occurrence that other western cultures would seem to, for example Harold Holt's disappearance, Jim Cairns' bookselling, dangerous animals etc.
6. Bryson sees a fusion of America and Britain in Australia, he describes Australia as an alternative southern California - 'Baywatch with cricket'. Is there a mix of Britain and America in Australia? Typically Australian, what does this mean exactly? Have we changed from the ocker image, or is it still present albeit to a smaller degree. Would Nino Culotta (John O'Grady) be able to write of Australians in the same way in this day and age? Have we become so cosmopolitan to have no particular image other than a parody of what were the images at the Sydney Olympics?
7. What do you think of Bryson's analysis of the Australian way of life?
8. Australia is described by its inhabitants as a lucky country, but one bit that doesn't fit the image of a successful open country is the plight of the aborigines. The statistics that Bryson quoted on how relatively poorly they fare in modern society are devastating and it seems that the superficial answer is that modern twentieth century civilisation and the aborigines don't mix. Is this true? One section of the book Bryson described the social engineering policy designed to bridge this gap between the two worlds. How does this affect our, and the world view of Australia, Should the term "Lucky Country" be amended to "as long as you're a WASP".
9. Did you read this book all in one go, or in sections? Do you think it is a 'dip into' sort of book? Is it a book that you would read as a travel guide, would it influence anyone to visit Australia?

**Review of "In a Sunburned Country" (Down Under) for The New York Times, June 5, 2000**

**Say, Mate, Just What Is It About You Australians? By JANET MASLIN**

When Bill Bryson arrives in Sydney to begin the touristy Australian walkabout that is the basis for "In a Sunburned Country," he is there to write a magazine article for a London Sunday newspaper. He is also being written about by a reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald who, for the sake of local colour, takes him boogie boarding at a nearby beach.

Modest as it is, this watery adventure is then immortalized from three different perspectives. There is a friendly Australian newspaper report, from which the author quotes a paragraph about himself. There are pictures taken by a newspaper photographer. And there are a couple of mild, rambling pages at the book's start about an escapade that is of interest strictly because of Mr. Bryson's status as a visiting celebrity. There is not much other explanation for why, in a book with a whole continent to cover, this struck him as a good place to start.

In his earlier travel writings, like the enormously winning "Notes From a Small Island," about his rambles through Britain, Mr. Bryson presented himself as a sharp-eyed and hilariously self-deprecating observer, a traveler who was wry, eager and endlessly game. Newly in danger of ossifying into a professional wag and curmudgeon, he is someone who

often makes asides about book tours or speaking engagements and takes a three-day first-class train trip while recoiling at the horrors of traveling less comfortably. "I am almost certain that if we had not had the train manager as an escort, they would have eaten us," he writes about being walked past the road-weary unfortunates riding in coach.

In a book whose marketing *raison d'être* are very clear (as a follow-up to the very popular "A Walk in the Woods," it is being "published just in time for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney," says to its flap copy), Mr. Bryson coasts too much but can still make most gratifying company.

"Gently I explained that it was not actually a condition of citizenship that I eat the food of my nation," he writes from Canberra, after having been directed by six teenagers in backward-facing baseball caps to the nearest McDonald's. As a native of Des Moines who can comfortably use phrases like "jolly nice time" thanks to two decades spent in England, he finds congenial reminders of both those countries in Australia and can ramble on about them as if chatting with a friend over a beer.

Unfortunately, actually chatting with a friend over a beer is also something to which he devotes considerable space, only seldom with amusing results. ("Because if I open them I'm afraid I'll bleed to death," replies a hung-over Mr. Bryson to a friend who asks why his eyes are shut.) He also returns far too frequently to the ideas that Australia is big, empty, hot, perilous, mysterious and pretty darn wonderful. "I nodded and reflected, not for the first time, what a strange, small, distant country Australia is," he tells us. "The monumental emptiness of Australia is not easy to convey," he also notes. And in a book that also finds time for observations about houseflies and the biting ants that have infested Brisbane: "That's the thing about Australia, you see. It teems with interesting stuff, but at the same time it's so vast and empty and forbidding that it generally takes a remarkable stroke of luck to find it." For "In a Sunburned Country," those strokes of luck are too few and far between.

Mr. Bryson has always written most endearingly about the oddball small-town encounter or kitschy tourist detail (about a giant model of a lobster: " 'Big, isn't it?' " I remarked at last, for very little escapes me in the world of fiberglass crustaceans.") But much of this book is devoted to more tedious matters, and not all of it is even firsthand.

Beyond describing many drowsiness-inducing trips to museums and lengthy walks ("It took about three hours, I suppose, to do the complete circuit of the parks"), he also relies on recycling books, articles and television documentary material into research-heavy passages. Mr. Bryson's efforts to create a bit of drama around such interludes can lead to the reader's, in effect, watching him read: "As I pulled out my second purchase, 'Crocodile Attack in Australia,' by Hugh Edwards, and waded chest-deep into its 240 pages of gruesome, violent attacks by this most cunning and unsporting of creatures."

"In a Sunburned Country" comes to life most fully when Mr. Bryson gets the homework out of the way, drops the boosterism ("I couldn't wait to see more") and opens his eyes and ears, just as he did in his coach days. Many of the book's most interesting passages concern the natural wonders of Australia and the great difficulty of traveling through the country's loneliest regions.

He also makes a fine comic fetish out of flinching at the various dangers to be found there. Admiring a particularly noxious spider in a museum display, he observes: "According to the label, you can identify a funnel web by 'the mating organ on the male palp, deeply curved fovea, shiny carapace and lower labium studded with short blunt spines.' Alternatively, of course, you can just let it sting you."

Though it covers many of the expected bases, the book is notably sketchy in its discussion of Australia's Aborigines. Mr. Bryson writes stingingly about racism but acknowledges that, like most white Australians, he has had virtually no contact with the Aborigine population.

There is also a surprising obliviousness to the wild-eyed popular culture behind such eccentric creations as "Mad Max," "Muriel's Wedding," "Crocodile Dundee," with no glimpse of what it is about Australians that is reflected in such idiosyncratic hits. And the rowdy, bone-dry Australian sense of humor, which the reader might expect to find celebrated here, is only occasionally heard above the more subdued Brysonianism. But when the author expresses surprise to learn that a cricket match is being held in Adelaide, a bystander does say to him: "Well, either that or thirty thousand people have made one pretty amazing bloody mistake, wouldn't you say?"

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It'll Start Getting Cold Any Minute Now, Just You See - Fred Hoyle

Pecked to Death by Ducks - Tim Cahill

Pleasures of a Tangled Life - Jan Morris

The Battle for Room Service: Journeys to All the Safe Places - Mark Lawson